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ENGLISH 305: PROSE SECTION

ANNOTATION #3: Flannery O'Connor

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I found Flannery O'Connor's essay concerning the creation of short stories both informative and entertaining. (He manages to discuss nearly every aspect of the writing process <sup>of</sup> for a short story to some degree or another in this essay.) The essay seems to focus more on the perfection of writing than on the fundamentals that help a writer create his or her work. This is to say that the essay has been written for those who have *some* experience in writing and not those who need instruction on how to begin. I was very interested in some of his statements and opinions about writing. These include his opinion of fiction and the average reader, his belief that starting with a character will yield more success than starting with a plot, and his idea that a story should shock both the reader and the writer.

*- this seems redundant when you read the next sentence*  
*- what about what O'Connor has to say about writing as discovery?*

O'Connor's first bold statement describes his dislike toward the "average" reader and his regard for the art of fiction. This is a conflict that every writer must deal with, though I had never pondered it until now. He sees his task in writing as a dual purpose; he must please the "average" reader while loading the story with underlying symbolism and meaning for the reader who looks deeper into the work for satisfaction. When I thought about this statement, I realized how very important this dual purpose was for a story to be successful. For example, John Steinbeck wrote stories that the American public loved, but he also hid meaning within them for the more critical reader. O'Connor goes on to say that these two identities of the reader are actually opposing reflections of the writer. To me, this alludes to the fact that most writing serves the interest of the writer instead of the reader.

His next idea is that a story will yield more success if it begins with a character and no apparent plot. This idea is one that I have never even considered. I am sure that there are other writers who too often find themselves dreaming up a plot, as I do, that they might build upon. O'Connor says that this will produce characters with no identity or personality. When the plot serves as the basis of the story, the characters seem conjured up from somewhere with the duty to perform the tasks in the novel. Obviously, this

would create a cast of bland, uninteresting characters. He describes how a character can acquire greater personality through his speech and mannerisms, using the dialects and the etiquette of the Southern states as his example. This is a good example of how the writer's personality should be utilized to create realism in characters as well. For example, Jack London used his experiences in the Yukon and Steinbeck used his experiences in the American Southwest and Mexico. Every author uses the life that they are familiar with to some degree in their works, as it is part of their personality. This correlation between the real world and the characters in the story give validity to any events that might take place, no matter what they will be. This is why O'Connor believes that it is necessary to begin with a character rather than a plot. A valid character will lead the writing into convincing events, whereas convincing events will not lead to the creation of valid characters.

This all relates to his most fascinating idea: that a story should create a shock in both the reader and the writer upon completion. Once the writer has created these characters, who each have definite identities and convincing personalities, they are able to perform any task he or she desires in the following pages. This opens up a world with no restrictions. On the other hand, beginning with a convincing plot will restrict the writer to producing certain characters that, once again, might not be acceptable to the reader. This will immediately destroy the story's plot. O'Connor suggests that the writer should begin with these characters and let their actions take place on their own. Basically he says that the writer should just unconsciously write. Once the writer has developed satisfying characters, the plot could go anywhere. This is why the outcome of the story should inevitably shock the writer. And if the writer is genuinely surprised at his or her own turn of events in the story, then the reader certainly will be astonished.

The things that Flannery O'Connor have addressed in this essay have very much changed my view toward my own writing. In the past, I have failed to employ and even realize some of the ideas that he has described. I have always thought up a unique and

I agree  
that this is  
a wonderful  
statement:  
that the writer  
should be  
surprised/  
shocked by  
their creation

entertaining plot and tried to lead myself into it. Perhaps this is why my stories have been so restricted in the past. Obviously, I have never thought that my plot should take root as I write, as he says, since I have always created it before writing my first word. I am looking forward to making an attempt at the style that O'Connor has described. I think his ideas are certainly intelligent and have come to him with experience.

B<sup>+</sup> Jason, I am excited by the ideas that you have taken from O'Connor, especially the ones that look at surprise and character. In our 1/2 semester we will look first at ways of triggering plot and secondly with character but, you can begin developing your characters, at least thinking about them, at any stage.